



THE ISLAND OF THE STAIRS



Being a True Account of Certain Strange and Wonderful Adventures of Master John Hampdon, Seaman, and Mistress Lucy Wilberforce, Gentlewoman, in the Great South Seas.

By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

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CHAPTER X.

In Which We Pass the Barrier.

THE lazarette was well provided, and I stocked the boat handsomely, not forgetting an ax, a lantern and tinder box. There was not much water, but I emptied some bottles of wine and filled them, although I did not much worry on that account because there would be plenty of water undoubtedly on the island. The boat was provided with a compass and a mast and sail. I got into her as she swung at the davits and overhauled spar and gear. Then I shipped the tiller, and presently everything was ready. A final search brought to light a narrow locker in the captain's room, which I forced open and which I found to contain a fine fowling piece, a double barreled shotgun and a heavy musket with plenty of powder and ball. These I passed into the boat also.

"Have you got now what you wish to take?" I asked when all my preparations were completed.

"A change of linen, some toilet articles and necessities, brush and comb, needles and thread," she answered, holding up her bundle.

"Good," said I. I judged it was about 10 o'clock at night. "Now, do you get into the boat, madam."

She had not been on the ship for six months without having learned something, and she instantly asked me:

"But how are you going to lower it away?"

"I will have to go up on deck for that," I said.

"But won't they see you?"

"I don't think so, but whether they do or not we must chance it, but if anything should happen to me I'll cut the boat adrift, and you will be in God's hands."

Silently I assisted her to take her place in the stern sheets. It was not a large boat. On the contrary, yet she made but a small figure sitting there. Then I went on deck. I had a can of oil with me to oil the blocks. It was as I fancied. By that time everybody on the ship was asleep in a drunken stupor. The ship was deserted so far as human supervision was concerned.

Still I didn't neglect any precaution. I oiled the shives of the block and lowered the boat away carefully, inch by inch, until it was water borne. I reassured my mistress by whispered words as I did so. She had had her instructions and right well she followed them. She had her boat hook out and fended off the minute the boat touched the water. For me to belay the falls and slide down the forward one to cast off and take my place in the boat was but the work of an instant. The oars had been carefully muffled. Although the noise of the waves rendered conversation quite safe, we neither of us spoke a word until I had rowed some distance from the ship.

It was nearly midnight before we got everything shipshape, my lady bravely helping me with her best efforts, and the little vessel threshed gallantly through the big seas.

I had carefully taken my bearings during the day and as I had a good compass on the boat I knew exactly

how to steer. Fortunately the wind held steady. I laid her course so as to clear the northeast end of the island, around which I intended to swing so as to be hidden from the ship at daybreak.

I told her after awhile that she was safe. No sound had come from the ship and the lights in the cabin which at first we could see dimly presently disappeared. Our escape had not been discovered. I suggested at last that she should go to sleep. I arranged the boat cloak and blankets and although she had to be much persuaded I finally prevailed upon her to lie down in the boat, her head by my knees, and thus we sailed on through the night.

When day broke I hauled aft the sheet and headed the boat to the southward, for I had now crossed the head of the island and could run down the other side. By the time it was fairly dawn I had made enough southing to place the north end of the island between ourselves and the ship. I steered the boat toward the land.

My hopes were high and I felt a kind of exhilaration at our escape, although I was by no means inclined to minimize the possibilities of peril we might soon be compelled to meet. The island was our destination, however, and for it therefore I determinedly headed my small craft with its precious and still peacefully sleeping cargo.

The island was unlike any I had ever looked upon. In the first place, like most Pacific islands, it was inclosed by a barrier reef, over which the waves broke in whitecaps as far as I could see. I supposed that somewhere there would be an opening in the reef through which we could sail. That was invariably the case with all such islands that I had ever known or read about. But I could not see the opening from the boat yet. The lagoon enclosed by the barrier reef seemed to be a quarter or half a mile wide.

The strangest part of the whole scene was that the island itself looked like a whitish gray wall rising straight up from the lagoon for, I suppose, from 150 feet in the lowest part to 300 feet or more without a break. Its top was covered with greenery. It stood up like a solid rampart of stone. From where we were I couldn't see the end of the island, although from my inspection of it the day before I judged it might be six or eight miles long, and as I had sailed past it I estimated it was about the same breadth and nearly circular in shape.

A long distance away on the other side and hard to be seen at all from the level of the sea in the small boat lay other islands, faintly outlined on the far horizon.

I suppose I must have thrashed about somewhat when I brought the dingy to the wind and changed her course, for presently my little mistress awoke. She sat up instantly, and after the briefest acknowledgment of my good morning and the briefest reply to my inquiry as to how she did she stared at the land toward which we were edging in so far as the wind would allow. It was a bleak, inhospitable looking place, that gray, rough wall, in spite of its infrequent crusting of verdure, I will admit, and she, too, found it so. After she had stared hard at the land she cast an anxious

glance to leeward, but, of course, could make nothing of the distant islands there.

"We must get ashore," said I, "as soon as possible. By the time their debauch will have worn off they will either bring the ship here or send the boat after us. Afloat we can do nothing, ashore we may find some concealment and probably make some defense."

"It is a bleak looking spot."

Indeed, not a curl of smoke anywhere betrayed the presence of mankind. Had it not been for depressions in the walls of the cliff here and there which were filled with vegetation, one might have supposed the island to be nothing but a desolate and arid rock, but this reassured me. I thought it strange that there was no mountain or hill rising from beyond the top of the wall, but I was yet to see how strange the island was.

But as it was full morning now I decided that first of all the creature comforts had to be thought of. I offered to relinquish the tiller and prepare something to eat, but Mistress Lucy took that upon herself. What we had was cold, but there was plenty of it, and at my urging she ate heartily. For myself I needed no stimulus but my raging hunger. I wanted her to be in fettle for whatever might happen.

We had not much conversation the while, but I do remember that she did say she had rather be here alone with me than on the ship, whereat my heart pounded, but I had sense enough to say nothing. Her loneliness and helplessness appealed to me. I might have been bold under other circumstances, but not now.

Well, we coasted along that barrier reef a good part of the morning until we reached the other end of the island and discovered to our dismay that there was absolutely no opening, no break in it through which we could make our way. When we reached the lower end my lady was for sailing around on the other side, but this I did not dare. We had heard nothing from the ship or her boats, and I didn't propose to arouse any pursuit by coming within possible range of her glasses. I did not know where the Rose of Devon lay.

"Madam," said I at last, "there is naught for us but to try to go over the reef in some fashion. As I examined the island yesterday through the glasses I couldn't see any opening in the reef on that side, and, although I never saw or heard of a case like this before, I make no doubt but what the reef is continuous and there is no access to the island except over it. And come to think of it, Sir Philip's chart showed no opening either."

"I recall that the reef completely encircles the island in the map," assented my lady.

"Then we must even pass over it as we can. I have had some experience in taking a boat through the surf, and, although it is a prodigious risk, I believe I can take this one over. I think we shall win through if you will sit perfectly quiet and trust to me."

"I will do whatever you tell me," she said with a most becoming and unusual meekness. "I think—I know—I trust you entirely, Master Hampdon."

"Very well," said I quietly, "and may God help us!"

Fortunately the tide was making toward the shore of the island. I selected a spot where the huge, rolling waves seemed to break more smoothly than elsewhere, which argued a greater depth of water over the barrier, less roughness and fewer possibilities of being wrecked on the jagged points of the coral reef. Dousing the sail, unshipping the tiller and rudder and pulling the oars with all my strength after an unuttered prayer I shot the boat directly toward the spot I had chosen. Just before I reached it I threw the oars inboard, seized one of them, which I wished to use as a steering oar, and stepped aft past my lady, who sat a little forward and well down in the bottom of the boat. I braced myself in the stern sheets and waited. We were racing toward that reef with dizzy speed, rising with the uplift up the wave. I had just time for one word.

"If we die," I shouted, "remember that I have been your true servant always."

She nodded her head, her eyes glistening, and then I lost sight of her. A huge roller overtook us. The little boat rose and rose and rose with a giddy, furious motion. Suddenly it began to turn. If it went broadside to the reef and a wave caught it or one broke over it we should be lost, but I had foreseen the danger. I threw out my oar and with every pound of strength in arm, leg and body I thrust blindly, desperately, against the thrust of the sea. It was an unequal combat, a man against the Pacific ocean. I couldn't have maintained it for long. And yet it seemed hours. The strain was terrific.

The wave we were riding broke just as we reached the top. We sank down into what seemed a valley of water, the breakers roared in our ears, the spray fell over us like rain. We sank lower and lower, there was a sound of grinding along the keel. We had struck the coral evidently. I thought this was all, for another moment and the bottom would have been ripped out of her; but no, we were over in safety.

The last remainder of the wave broke fairly over us and struck me in the back as I stood aft with such force as to bring me to my knees. However, in that position I acted as a sort of breakwater and the dinghy was not completely filled. Although she had shipped quantities of sea, she still floated. The force with which we had been thrown over the crest of the wave drove us landward with tremendous



The Strain Was Terrific.

speed. It was terrific. I was stunned for a moment, but the sweetest voice in the world recalled me to my senses.

"It was glorious, magnificent!" cried my mistress exultantly. "Are you hurt? Are we safe?"

Her clothes had been drenched, of course, but she was otherwise unharmed and there was a strange light in her eyes.

"I am not hurt," I answered. "God has preserved me thus far."

"For me," she said softly. "For your service," I answered gravely, quite understanding that was what she meant.

And now to make the landing. The boat, while it had come to a standstill, was filled with water, but I couldn't stop to bail it out then, so I stepped carefully forward, shipped the oars and rowed slowly forward across the lagoon.

(Continued next week.)

AMERICA'S SWITZERLAND, WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

BY C. A. RIDLEY.

(Continued from last week.)

Where the winds chant threnodie now and then

And sumac and sassafras yellow with age

Are signs of autumn among the hills

Where in life's morning time I roamed

And drank the sweetness drop by drop

Till time and tide drove me away

From America's Switzerland—my home.

When twilight shadows flirt with moon

And woods and fields are wrapped in gold

Gleaming like the burnished bridge Of cardinal dyer in the rainbow;

When the mountain peaks seem strangely tall

And pile themselves along the West Like driftwood by the sea

Until the sun—great ball of fire—Exploded above their winsome crowns

And lets his fractured glory drip To deepest hollow and lowest limb,

This is September, where I was born.

A sort of Indian Summer time After the flowers drop and fade

And ere the winding snow-storm Spreads its winding sheet o'er them.

A magic with colors rich Seems to sprinkle its borrowed dyes

In bewildering witchery over the world

That soon will move with steadier step

Amid the winter's chilly breath.

On the far away mountains hang A luminous mist of azure-haze As if some angelic cohort Had flung its flaming banners down.

A MOUNTAIN STORM.

A mountain storm is a wonderful thing.

I've been far out on the treacherous sea

And watched the storm-god walk the waves

Till foamy fingers clutched our ship And shook it wildly amid the spray

Whose spumid madness fiercely beat

Till conquered by that "Conquering Hand"

In whose hollow the world is held; But heaven's artillery and roar of winds

When heard from the mountain's lofty crest

Is excited nature at its best.

I've often stood with bated breath On the mountain's shoulder bare

And watched the boiling thunder-heads

Spread their wildness like a scowl Across the sun's rich, beaming face

Till creepy twilight dropped on noon I've seen the flash of electric fore

Flung un-scabbored across the sky And quickly followed by mutter and growl

That swelled to deep-voiced, laboring guns

Whose lery war-peals shook the earth

Till bank and crag and o'er hanging cliff

Echoed back the thunder's roll And lifted eternal breastworks up

To meet the challenge of the wind. I've seen the sheets of blinding rain

Whirl their whiteness across the world

Like spectral figures in promenade. I remember standing on Wayab-ball

In the mountain-land I love so well And watching a storm-cloud slowly pitch

Its black squadrons in the vale below.

I stood wrapped in the glory of noon With the voice of thunder 'neath my feet.

Looking down upon the cloud It seemed a restless, surging sea

Bordered only by peaks of blue Between whose silent sunny slopes

The ocean rolled its fog-wet waves. With all its fury at last forespent

Down thru the shadows the sunshine went

Scattering glory o'er storm-wet trees And wooing from cove the birds and bees.

Peace like a river settled down Where the emerald valley held the town

And the Tennessee forever flows.

A MOUNTAIN LASS.

Do you know in very truth

The winsome beauty of a mountain girl—

Product of the OLD NORTH STATE? Her delicate cheeks glow with glow

freshness

Like the sheen of morning light

When aurora's flush mantles the East

And flings her fiery lances out To where the trees rich colors meet,

Her eyes so full of tenderness are

That an atmosphere of holy trust Calms the feverish bleeding heart

And wakes the tuneful notes of love

Long hushed in many a soul. Scintillant mind with exquisite poise,

With wildest witchery in her laugh Unless some ear for sorrow set

Catches the minor chord of pain. Her gentle spirit and charm of soul

Remains unmatched in all the world.

Oft I have seen her beautiful face In truthful smiles and rich, arrayed,

Till her very presence enchanted me.

(Continued next week.)